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APPEARANCE

# Appearance

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## Chapter 1 by Neolillz ❤

It was during the first snowstorm of the new year. The colour green was something you saw in pictures tacked to the wall or in a memory from what felt like years ago. I was living alone in a studio apartment in a shitty section of west Cleveland. Everything was the same colour in that neighbourhood, even in the summer. It was the kind of dirty grey that gets swept up into the air of unfinished basements and cold storage warehouses. There were no stairs to get to my apartment. I was as far down as you can get without going under. I slept in the same room as the oven, but I liked the smallness of it. When I was young my sister and I used to zip each other into suitcases. We would drag the suitcases up and down the stairs, and all around the living room, laughing hysterically.

That first morning I wrapped a scarf around my neck and lit the stove. I tripped over my shoes on my way to the sink to fill the pot. I looked down at them accusingly, as if anyone but me could have put them there. I looked up after kicking them across the room and that was when I saw him for the first time. I wouldn't find out until later that he had been there for weeks. Inches away from me as I slept. An arm's reach as I showered and dressed each morning. He sat with me while I overcooked my eggs and searched the internet for a cat to adopt, each time deciding

to keep him. I never told anyone about him. I never told anyone about the way he watched me sleep, the way he followed me around the house, the way he waited for me to wake up so he could eat my breakfast. I never told anyone about the way he smelled like old sweat and cigarette smoke, the way he tasted like ash and dirt. I never told anyone about the way he made me feel safe, the way he made me feel wanted, the way he made me feel loved.

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The outside world that day was a mix of grey and white, a mix of ground and sky. The ground was a bright sunless black, covered in the outline of man

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He was fading in and out with each gust of wind, like a Polaroid gone backwards. But I saw him. I saw the tip of one of his pink fingers poking out of a hole in his glove. His hands were up against his mouth which was covered in a thick dark beard and his breath came in a long slow billow of white smoke, like the mouth of a gutter under a frozen street. His hood was pulled up over his head which made his eyes ever brighter in the shadow. I couldn't tell what colour they were, but they seemed to have a reflection inside them like the round outline of a flashbulb in the eye of a magazine model. I didn't scream. I felt nothing like adrenaline, or dread. Or that feeling when your heart beats so fast it makes you want to throw up. Nothing like that happened. If someone told me that they saw a strange man staring at them through their window I would have expected to hear them say, "And then I screamed and dropped my glass and it shattered and I ran to the phone and dialled 911 and then I ran to my front door and pulled the deadbolt across and then I hid in the bathroom with the door closed and I couldn't stop shaking." But I didn't do any of that. I stood completely still as if someone was holding me there, and I watched as the man I saw so clearly disappeared into the endless white.

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